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On the Ground: Real-world Solutions from Start to Finish: Tips from an Imperfect but Aspiring Writer

Ashley Ames Ahlbrand

Indiana University Maurer School of Law, aaahlbra@indiana.edu

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ON THE GROUND: REAL-WORLD SOLUTIONS **FROM START TO FINISH** TIPS FROM AN IMPERFECT BUT ASPIRING WRITER

Tools, strategies, and resources for finding the writing process that works best for you.

BY ASHLEY AMES AHLBRAND

I have a love-hate relationship with writing. Ever since I wrote my first term paper, I have relished researching a thesis topic and exploring my findings. I love assembling the seemingly remote pieces of the puzzle and watching the image take form. (It is perhaps no small wonder that I pursued a career in librarianship, where research is front and center.) Like so many of my fellow English majors, I also love the romantic notion of the writing life—nestling in at a cozy coffee shop to write for hours on end, the shop's buzz in the background, saturated in the aroma of fresh ground coffee; or taking a page out of Thoreau's book, spending my days hidden away in a quiet cabin, immersed in the sounds and smells of nature, alone with my thoughts. Distraction-free. Reality, sadly, is far less idyllic. Even over the past year, when we have all been more isolated than usual, when we have spent most of our days, weeks, and months at home rather than in the office, the hustle and bustle of the workplace still found us.

As legal information professionals, the very nature of our work lies in helping others—whether that's teaching a class, creating research resources, or conducting research for a patron—assisting others takes priority. Writing, on the other hand, even if it is a work requirement, often feels more personal in nature, shunted to the back burner by intervening patron requests. If you are like me,



writing can feel like a mammoth task; when planned writing time gets interrupted, it can feel impossible to reset and refocus, and your writing timeline gets pushed further down the road.

To stabilize my relationship with writing, to learn the secrets to being a successful writer in a world where most of us cannot simply shut ourselves away from distraction and write full time, I have found many strategies, tools, and kernels of wisdom that have proven helpful and healing to me. If you have writing aspirations but are struggling with one or more stages of the writing process, I hope the ideas presented in this column will offer you some small bit of comfort and support.

Generating Ideas

Write What You Know. If you want to write (or need to), and are struggling to come up with something to write about, one solid strategy for generating writing topics is to think about your own work. Research solutions to your workplace frustrations; share your workplace success stories; and detail your teaching experiences. We can all learn from each other's triumphs and tribulations.

Write What You Want to Know. In a similar vein, if a question has arisen through your work or through something you have read or seen recently, answer your own question and share it with others. The research and writing experience is always most satisfying when it pertains to a topic you are interested in, so satisfy your own curiosity in your research and share the results with your readers.

Read to Write. This leads to a related piece of advice: Read. One thing I learned from participating in a faculty writing group was that as I started reading more—even outside of my own discipline—I became more inspired to write.

Presentation to Publication. Another common strategy for publishing is to repurpose existing work. If you have written a shorter publication, for example, are there ways to expand on the topic for a separate, lengthier project? If you gave a presentation on a topic, you might consider whether you can generate an article based on that presentation. (For more ideas see bit.ly/SO21inside.)

Cultivating Ideas

If generating ideas is the first step, another crucial stage is determining whether an idea is worth pursuing. One exercise I have found useful at this stage, particularly for a planned lengthier project, is to take some time over a period of a week or so to freewrite about the topic—start fresh each day, without re-reading or deleting—leave the topic alone for a few days, then go back and read everything you wrote. (Learn more

at bit.ly/SO21chronicle.) Chances are good that some cogent idea will have come to light.

Another simple strategy for when you are feeling stuck or unfocused is to take a walk. I have found this particularly helpful for my own process. When I take my dog out for a walk, I find that my mind clears, and I can work out whatever bumps were interrupting my writing process. I recommend that you take your smartphone or something to write with, though, so that you do not forget your moments of clarity by the time you get home.

Productivity

One of the greatest challenges I encounter with writing is finding time to write. I always go into writing projects with the best of intentions, carefully carving out blocks of free time in my schedule when I'll be able to write; but it always seems like something intervenes—a faculty member will ask for a last-minute research assist, a student will come in with questions about one of my assignments, or someone will schedule a meeting that only fits during that time. Suddenly those writing spaces have disappeared. I become once again a “binge-writer,” tackling most of the writing in one or two large time chunks, usually when the deadline is knocking down my door. In some ways, this is very effective: The deadline is looming, time is up, I *must* write. But the downside to the binge-writing approach is that it can also make the act of writing a stressful event, facing down a mammoth project, dreading the hours of work ahead of you.

To avoid this kind of writing anxiety, many writing coaches recommend creating a writing routine for yourself. Carve out a regular writing schedule you can replicate each week and stick to it; eventually, that writing schedule will become a *habit*, and will not be as hard to maintain. Even if you are not actively writing an article at the time, keep to the schedule. Brainstorm, read, outline, and freewrite. What your writing schedule will

look like depends on you and your needs. Some people like to write first thing in the morning; if afternoons are quieter or more focused for you, then perhaps a time at the end of the day is better. The length of reserved writing time may vary as well. Many recommend 25 minutes, some even shorter. Instead of shorter daily writing, other experts still advocate for the writing day. (Learn more at bit.ly/SO21writingday.) There is no right answer, or if there is, it's "whatever works for you."

If you are having trouble holding yourself to your writing schedule, consider joining, or forming, a writing group. I have participated in two faculty writing groups at my university this past year and found the experience very rewarding. We were not there to edit each other's work or critique each other's writing process; we were there for accountability, committing to one time each week when we knew we would show up (this year virtually) to write. Of course, you do not need a formal program. It can be as simple as finding a colleague

who has a writing goal, agreeing on a time to meet, virtually or in person, and simply showing up and writing. Accountability is a powerful productivity tool.

One simple routine I have found helpful is maintaining a daily writing journal. At the end of each day, whether at the end of the workday, or even when I get home, I write. My writing usually includes what I did that day, what I read, and any ideas that struck me throughout the day. This has not only helped me generate writing ideas and overcome writing blocks, but reflecting on my day has helped me identify my writing aversion patterns and helped me to break them. In addition, journaling at the end of the day has also helped me close out the workday, which has been a needed intervention in the past year of working mostly remote, where work and relaxation occurred in the same space, and work too often bled into personal time, leaving me perpetually exhausted and drained.

Writing advice abounds, and for every article that tells you to write in

short, daily increments, you will find another that advocates the longer binge-writing techniques. There is no right way to write. The best advice is to try out a few different methods and find what works for you. We may not have the luxury of retreating to idyllic woodland sanctuaries or nestling into cozy cafés to submerge ourselves in our writing, but by developing and sticking to our own custom writing routines, we can all achieve our writing goals. ■

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ASHLEY AMES AHLBRAND
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR
PUBLIC SERVICES

Indiana University Maurer
School of Law
Jerome Hall Law Library
Bloomington, IN
aaahlbra@indiana.edu

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HELPFUL TOOLS

Following are a few tools that may help you manage your writing projects, from start to finish.

- **If you are struggling with organizing your writing project or writing time**, there are many tools that can help you manage or track your writing projects. bit.ly/SO21productivity
 - If you prefer online tools, try something like Trello. bit.ly/SO21Trello
 - I often find the tactile nature of low-tech organization to be more successful for me; good old-fashioned Post-Its on a whiteboard, on the wall, or even in a notebook can make it easy and simple to organize and reorganize to track progress.
- **If you are trying to develop a writing routine**, online tools such as 750 Words will send you daily reminders to write; and tools like Pomodoro or apps such as Forest will help you avoid distraction. bit.ly/SO21750Words; bit.ly/SO21Pomodoro; bit.ly/SO21Forest
- **If you want to seamlessly move from brainstorm to outline to draft**, there are several programs designed for writers to do just that. Used by everyone from academics to novelists, you might check out Scrivener or Plottr, to name just two (note that these are not free tools, but both provide free trials). bit.ly/SO21Scrivener; bit.ly/SO21Plottr
- **If you would like more tips on writing**, there are several good sources that offer writing tips for the aspiring scholar. The *Chronicle for Higher Education* has a series of short advice columns on writing and productivity. bit.ly/SO21Chronicletips
- **If you are looking for a deeper dive**, two books you might explore are Wendy Belcher's *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success*, and Paul Silvia's *How To Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*. bit.ly/SO21Belcher; bit.ly/SO21Silvia